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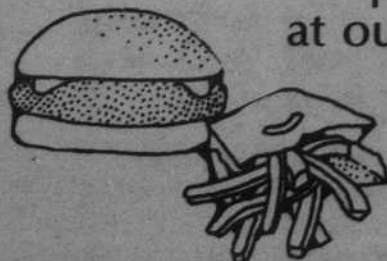
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C I N E M A

Breaking Hollywood's barriers

Robert Townsend is a contemporary success story.

After a moderately successful stage career and national tours as a stand-up comedian, Townsend has finally received due recognition from critics and members of the film industry for his second film, *A Soldier's Story*.

Townsend plays Corporal Ellis in the film, which is a current critical and popular hit.

In a phone interview a congenial and friendly Townsend was willing to talk about one of the Hollywood film industry's

most serious problems: the attitude of Hollywood bureaucracy in dealing with black performers.

"I'd call it racist," he said.

The common practice in Hollywood is to cast blacks only in parts specifically written for blacks. "A lot of times they just say 'Well, we need one black,' and it's written in the script 'Black Guy,'" he says. "He never has a name, it's just 'Black Guy.'"

Townsend is more than slightly critical of that standard Hollywood procedure. The situation he describes is something of a Catch-22 — the parts open to black actors are often stereotyped portrayals, like muggers, pimps and junkies.

After a few appearances in roles like these, actors are typecast; when desirable roles do come along, they are overlooked.

"I've been very selective," says Townsend. "I don't do just anything. I do a job and I save my money and when another role comes along, if I like the role I take it."

Townsend's first role came in Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire*, where he played a singer in a vocal group called the Sorels. It was a relatively minor role, but the exposure may have led to his part in Norman Jewison's *A Soldier's Story*.

"I was on the road and when I came back to town the play (*A Soldier's Story*) was going on. I had no idea I would do the movie. I heard they were doing auditions for the movie and I thought 'Ahh, they're probably going to use the guys from the play,' and the next thing you know they say 'Robert, do you want to do it?'" he says. "And I said, 'Yes.'"

A Soldier's Story, being a drama with a nearly all-black cast, has been considered a risk for Hollywood, but has held its own at the box office. Townsend calls it a "trendsetter."

"I think that films like *A Soldier's Story* are beginning to break the line and say 'Hey, we

can do serious dramas that are entertaining and that people will pay to see'... I think people, and the industry, will begin to look at black actors differently because of *A Soldier's Story*," he says.

Townsend is optimistic about the improving situation for



Photo courtesy Columbia Pictures
 Robert Townsend, who plays Corporal Ellis in *A Soldier's Story*, says he thinks the Hollywood color barrier is slowly being broken.

black actors. Lou Gossett's role in *An Officer And A Gentleman* was not written for a black, but he won the role. "And I think it's going to happen more," says Townsend.

As for Townsend himself, he has managed to carve out a foothold in the Hollywood picture industry. Following his work in *A Soldier's Story*, he was offered a three-picture deal with Richard Pryor; the rest of the cast struck similar deals in the industry.

So while the color barrier is slowly being broken in Hollywood, the change will take time, says Townsend. But blacks are receiving better and better roles, he says.

Townsend sums it up best himself. "I think it's going to happen more with the advent of *A Soldier's Story* because people are beginning to take even more chances."

Sean Axmaker

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